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# Calvary or limbo? Articulating identity and citizenship in two Italian Australian autobiographical narratives of World War II internment

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## Abstract

Almost 5,000 Italians were interned in Australia during World War II, a high proportion of them Queensland residents. Internment was a pivotal experience for the Italian community, both locally and nationally, complicating Italian Australians' sense of belonging to their adopted country. Through an examination of two migrant autobiographical narratives of internment, Osvaldo Bonutto's *A Migrant's Story* and Peter Dalseno's *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties*, this article explores the impact of internment on the experience and articulation of cultural and civic belonging to Australian society. It finds that internment was a 'trial' or 'transitional' phase for these internees' personal and civic identities, and that the articulation of these identities and sense of belonging is historically contingent, influenced by the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism in settlement ideology, as well as Italian Australians' changing place in Australian society throughout the twentieth century.

## Introduction

The experience of internment during World War II is pivotal to an entire generation of Italian Australians — both to the men interned and the families they left behind — as it prompted a re-evaluation of Italians' civic belonging to the Australian state and their socio-cultural belonging to the imagined community of the Australian nation. Almost 5,000 Italians were interned, approximately 20 per cent of them British subjects by either naturalisation or birth. At the time, Queensland was home to approximately one-third of Italians in Australia, largely due to the demand for labour on the cane fields, and interned a greater proportion of its Italian Australian residents than any other state.<sup>1</sup> The war and internment had the effect of highlighting Italians as a significant social, political and economic group in Australia, as well as making Italians consider their place within the broader context of Australian society, beyond their immediate communities. Consequently, experiences of internment have figured in several biographies and autobiographies written by Italian migrants of that generation.

This article focuses upon two autobiographical narratives by Italians settled in Queensland, Osvaldo Bonutto's *A Migrant's Story* (1963 and 1994) and Peter Dalseno's *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* (1994), which both feature experiences of internment. By the 1990s, when both narratives were published or republished, Italians had achieved a great sense of acceptance and belonging within a culturally diverse Australia, but the stories of Bonutto, Dalseno and other internment memoirists, such as Claudio Alcorso and Mario Sardi,<sup>2</sup> illustrate the various personal and political struggles faced along the way. As Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien observes, 'For some, internment has become a metaphor for the difficulties that were encountered in becoming established and being considered as Australian citizens, and as such it is now viewed as a rite of passage and a badge of honour.'<sup>3</sup> Such a metaphor is apparent in both narratives: Bonutto's 'Calvary' and Dalseno's 'limbo' lend themselves well to an interpretation of their internment experiences as a rite of passage for their civic identities and belonging.

The experience of internment is used in these narratives to explore the parameters of civic belonging and to articulate the development of cultural and civic identities for Bonutto and for Dalseno's 'character', Peter. For Bonutto, internment is his Calvary, a test of faith in his beloved adopted home; for Dalseno, it is a state of limbo in which he exists until his citizenship status can align with his previously staked claim to an Australian cultural and civic identity. Both authors carefully construct autobiographical narratives appropriate to the social, cultural and political milieu in which they are writing and, in the case of Bonutto's revised edition, publishing. For Bonutto, this results in rhetoric that is ardently assimilationist in the original text, but that is brought in line with dominant multicultural ideology in the revised edition. Dalseno's book, published at the same time as Bonutto's revised memoir, embraces multiculturalist ideology from the outset, casting a pivotal role for internment in the development of multicultural identities.

It is important to note that Australian citizenship did not exist as such at the time about which Bonutto and Dalseno wrote, although it had been instituted at the time of writing and publication.<sup>4</sup> When speaking historically, Bonutto refers to the status of naturalised British subject, but his contemporary reflections in the epilogue refer to Australian citizenship. Dalseno, however, refers anachronistically to Australian citizenship throughout his narrative, making the concept consistent with late twentieth-century understandings of this civic category. This ambiguity of citizenship and status at the time of World War II further promoted and conflated ideas of nationality, citizenship and race, with significant consequences for naturalised migrants, such as the Italians, who found themselves interned as 'enemy aliens' because of their ethnic origins and with disregard for their naturalised status as British subjects.<sup>5</sup> It demonstrates the precariousness of their belonging within Australian society and the insufficiency of naturalisation (citizenship) in protecting this.

## A brief history of Italians in Queensland

Although Italians had migrated to Australia throughout the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century saw an influx into Queensland in response to the demand for

white labour on the cane fields to replace the Pacific Islanders displaced by various pieces of legislation that led to their exclusion from the labour market and, in many cases, their deportation. This wave of Italian immigration, occurring largely within the interwar years, largely comprised men who worked predominantly as cane cutters, labourers and farmers, and who favoured rural settlements. Patterns of chain migration became more prevalent during this stage, resulting in more permanent settlements, larger communities and marginally more female migrants than in the first stage. These women, however, were mainly wives and daughters, joining husbands and fathers who had been settled in Australia for a number of years; few Italian women migrated independently of family connections at this time. Images of Southern Europeans such as Italians and Greeks during this period were heavily stereotyped, racialised and subject to much negative press, ranging from their eating habits, to their hygiene, to accusations that they were taking jobs from Anglo-Celtic Australians — despite the fact they had been needed to take on the hard labour in the hot environs of northern Queensland for which Anglo-Celtic Australians had been deemed unsuitable.<sup>6</sup>

In response to a campaign by the Australian Workers' Union against 'excessive' Italian migration into the sugar cane districts during the 1920s, in 1925 the Queensland government commissioned a report on 'alien immigration' in the state, known as the Ferry Report.<sup>7</sup> In its analysis of the social and economic effects of Southern European migrants in the sugar cane regions, the report goes beyond the usual level of national differentiation between Italians, Greeks, Maltese and Spanish by dividing the Italians into the desirable Northerners and the undesirable Southerners. Its racialisation of Italians by region aligned with pre-existing regional tensions within the Italian community, but also with particular ideas of whiteness used to shape Australian society and immigration policy throughout the era of the White Australia policy.

The report is one example of the various forms of antipathy and discrimination experienced by some Italians in Australia at both official and unofficial levels in the interwar period, but negative sentiments towards Italians were exacerbated in the years leading to World War II as fascism developed as a political movement in both Italy and Australia. Nino Randazzo and Michael Cigler argue that fascism was not introduced into Australia by Italian migrants, but rather by Australian army officers.<sup>8</sup> The Italian community was divided on the matter, and there existed both pro- and anti-Fascist groups.<sup>9</sup> Italy's declaration of war against the Allies in 1940 heightened anti-Italian rhetoric in Australian policy and media, and resulted in the restriction of the activities of Italian Australians — particularly in Queensland — and the internment of Italian Australians defined as 'enemy aliens' and security risks.<sup>10</sup> Over 18,000 Italian prisoners of war were also sent to Australia between 1941 and 1947 and used to replace the labour on the land that had been siphoned into the war effort.<sup>11</sup> Despite their restricted freedoms, Italian POWs were treated reasonably well by the Australian farmers for whom they worked, and many actually returned to Australia as migrants after the war.<sup>12</sup>

Several thousand Italians resident in Australia — many of whom were naturalised — were interned as enemy aliens during World War II. Internment is thus an important experience in the history of Italians in Australia — particularly in the articulation of place and identity, and its effects on the role of the

migrant as Australian citizen. Gianfranco Cresciani argues that Australian paranoia regarding the imagined threat of Italian fascism, which resulted in the internment of Italian Australians, and the employment of Italian POWs in Australian rural industry during World War II ‘compelled Australians ... to take stock of Italians as a serious community ... the beginning of a process whereby attitudes changed at the periphery of established core Australian values’.<sup>13</sup> Don Dignan is far more critical of internment and its rationale, arguing that it allowed the ‘racist element in Queensland society ... to consummate their smouldering hatred’.<sup>14</sup>

The number of Italians interned during World War II totalled 4727, which was 10 per cent of the total Italian population in Australia at the time and more than half the total number of enemy aliens from various origins interned.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 20 per cent of Italian migrants interned were British subjects, either by naturalisation or birth,<sup>16</sup> and approximately 25 per cent of the total were resident in Queensland at the time of internment. In fact, one half of the total internees nationally, regardless of ethnic origin, were from Queensland, which Connors and colleagues suggest was due to its proximity to the Pacific theatre, and the concentration in that area of migrants from non-Allied nations.<sup>17</sup>

After the war ended, Italians were highly represented in the subsequent immigration boom during the era of post-war nation-building. The post-war migrants, notes Robert Pascoe, ‘did not take up the land, but led a highly urbanised lifestyle’.<sup>18</sup> Economically speaking, the Italian Australian population experienced a post-war boom of their own, as many hardworking migrants made their mark on various industries, such as construction, wine-making, restaurants, and produce shops. Female migration was more common, although it was still often linked to the process of chain migration.

Italian migration to Australia had dwindled by the mid-1970s, by which time there existed in Australia a significant Italian Australian population comprising Italian-born migrants and their Australian-born children and grandchildren. The concept of multiculturalism was introduced into Australian public policy in the early 1970s in recognition of the culturally diverse makeup of the Australian population, replacing previous concepts of cultural assimilation and integration. Ghasan Hage argues that the movement from multiculturalism as cultural government to multiculturalism as national identity is one of the most important ideological shifts between the governments of the 1970s and the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> The rhetoric of assimilation, active in public policy and discourse throughout most of the twentieth century, had required “‘New Australians” ... to speak English, behave like [Anglo] Australians, and to be absorbed into the population.’<sup>20</sup> Under multiculturalism, however, ethnic diversity was valued and migrants were supported in their efforts to maintain ethnic cultures and identities — albeit under the condition of some linguistic and civic assimilation.

It is in this context of Italian Australian integration into and success within the mainstream multicultural discourse that most of these internment memoirs have emerged; Osvaldo Bonutto’s *A Migrant’s Story* is the only internment memoir published prior to the multicultural era. Now secure within the nation’s multicultural identity that emerged as a result of post-World War II immigration, Italians could safely recall the era when their civic identity and belonging were more problematic.

## **Bonutto's Calvary: Internment as a test of faith for new British subjects**

Osvaldo Bonutto (1903–99) migrated from the Friuli Venezia Giulia region to Australia in 1924, sponsored by his brother's friend.<sup>21</sup> Bonutto lived most of his life in various regions of Queensland, such as Central Queensland and the Darling Downs. He worked in various industries, including cane cutting and tobacco farming, and as a business owner. He was also a member of various community and trade boards, such as the Tobacco Board, and the founding president of both Fogolar Furlan (a Friulian regional association) and the Italo-Australian Centre in Brisbane.

Bonutto became a naturalised British subject in 1932. He was interned twice during World War II, once at Gaythorne Internment Camp in Brisbane between June and October 1940 and again in April 1941 at Loveday in South Australia. He was released in 1943 and settled in Brisbane after his retirement in 1963; there he wrote his memoirs.

*A Migrant's Story* was republished in 1994 with the assistance of Bonutto's daughter, Elisa, but several portions of the text were removed in an attempt to 'bring it in line with present day attitudes'.<sup>22</sup> In this second edition, the original thirteen chapters were reduced to seven. These excised portions include the original dedication and preface, the second chapter, in which Bonutto gives a brief history of Italian migration and frankly discusses his views on the topic, and his epilogue, wherein he lays out the behaviour necessary for one to be a 'good' New Australian. Both editions have been consulted for the purpose of this article, but the critical focus will remain on the original edition, with consideration of what has been removed from the later edition and possible reasons for this. Bonutto's decision to edit the original text, as well as what was removed or altered, is indicative of the changes that occurred both for himself and in Australia over the thirty years between editions. Specifically, ideas about assimilation no longer held as much ideological currency in the multicultural 1990s as they had in the 1960s, and the very role and value of a migrant writing his memoirs had shifted according to this new multicultural context.

Throughout his narrative, Bonutto emphasises his fervent belief in assimilation and his own success in that regard. Although the call to assimilate is excised from the 1994 edition, the theme is nonetheless pervasive in the narrative. In his foreword to the 1994 edition, Dignan argues that Bonutto's autobiographical reflections encapsulate the ethos of a whole generation of Italo-Queenslanders who philosophically, if often sadly, responded to the escalating racism of Australia's inter-war years, and to the fierce assimilationism that prevailed in its ethnic policies and public attitudes long after the 1960s by Anglicising their own given names, by allowing or even encouraging their children to become monolingually Anglophone, and by reaching out towards some uniform identity in most ways.<sup>23</sup>

Such a view glosses over some of the more problematic and nuanced aspects of Bonutto's complicity with assimilation rhetoric; while an ardent assimilationist, Bonutto's activities within the Italian Australian community are ultimately foundational to the maintenance of Italian ethnic identity for both migrants and their Australian-born children. As mentioned, Bonutto was the founding president of two Italian Australian clubs, Fogolar Furlan and the Italo-Australian Centre in

Brisbane. Interestingly, Bonutto construes his involvement in the Italian Australian community as part of his civic duty as an Australian citizen of Italian origin, positing himself as a suitable role model of assimilated Australianness and as a suitable spokesperson or intermediary for the Italian community within Australia. Italian clubs and associations are also one of the means through which Italians in Australia maintain their cultural traditions.<sup>24</sup> Through his involvement with Italian Australian communities, Bonutto actually helps to maintain traditional Italian ways while advocating for and staking claim to assimilation to Australian ways. His ardent belief in the completeness of his own assimilation is also important for further understanding his crisis of faith in the Australian state during his internment.

In some ways, *A Migrant's Story* demonstrates how Bonutto saw himself as a model migrant, with the autobiographical act itself a testimony to his assimilation. The original 1963 epilogue, removed from the 1994 edition, concludes with advice to Italian migrants to Australia. In this passage, he encourages national pride, respect, loyalty and, above all, rapid assimilation into Australian society:

By trying to quickly merge into the general pattern of Australian Nationhood we will shorten the not too happy transitional period as 'foreigners' to that of fully-fledged Australian Citizens, with consequent beneficial results to both ourselves and our new Country.

I am sure the overwhelming majority of Australian people will gladly help us in this very important task and they will like us all the more if we really make a serious effort to become 'Dinkum' Australians in the shortest possible time.

I know that thousands and thousands of Italians have or are doing this but there are some who are too slow in getting 'Australianized'.

My appeal goes to these unconcerned 'slackers' who are doing a disservice to the migrants' cause.<sup>25</sup>

His use of words such as 'dinkum' and 'slackers',<sup>26</sup> as well as a passage where he thanks 'kind-hearted Aussies' as 'mates',<sup>27</sup> to name but a few examples, all serve as linguistic evidence of Bonutto's successful assimilation into Australian culture and society. Most importantly, his differentiation between 'Australian Citizens' and 'Australian people' indicates his differentiation between citizenship and ethnicity — that is, Australian *citizens* can be *made* through the transitional period wherein they are seen as foreigners, while Australian *people* are *born*. As Bonutto was born in Italy, he cannot shed his Italian ethnicity, but he can become an Australian citizen and, through his citizenship, lay claim to an Australian identity based upon civic responsibility.

As can be seen here, Bonutto makes an important distinction between citizenship and ethnicity that allows him to articulate simultaneously a sense of Australian civic identity and Italian ethnic identity, demonstrated through his involvement in Australian public life and Italian Australian communities respectively. Citizenship is portrayed in Bonutto's narrative as a public realm, connoting civic and political participation, responsibility and loyalty. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is attained by virtue of birth and is articulated in more 'natural' terms of filial affection and respect for the country of one's birth; to follow this logic, it might be said of Bonutto's children that they are of Australian citizens of 'Australian ethnicity', for example, while he is an Australian citizen of Italian ethnicity. This differentiation can be



understood through the distinction between state as a civic institution that can be joined voluntarily through naturalisation and nation as blood-and-soil birthright that also designates ethnicity. Throughout the narrative, Bonutto emphasises the importance of Australian citizenship and assimilation to Anglo Australian culture, but maintains a differentiation between citizenship and ethnicity that allows him to lay claim to his civic identity as Australian while also proudly believing his national (or ethnic) identity to be Italian, which in turn shapes the way he rationalises his identity and his internment.

Bonutto's experiences of internment, referred to in his 1963 epilogue as his 'Calvary',<sup>28</sup> are central to his construction of his Australian identity. His lengthy chapter on his internment, and its effects in the years that ensued, remains relatively untouched in the second edition. He also refers to his internment substantially in his original preface and epilogue. Rando observes that Bonutto does not appear particularly bitter about his internment, and questions whether this was not due to his pandering to 'authorities'<sup>29</sup> — that is, Bonutto's lack of bitterness may be part of his desire to project himself as a successfully assimilated and loyal Australian citizen. Certainly, Bonutto's objection does not appear to be to the internment policy itself when used to target actual, as opposed to perceived, security threats. Rather, he objects to its seemingly indiscriminate targeting of prominent members of specific migrant groups, the conditions of the camps, the way in which the internees were often treated, and the policy's disregard of internees' naturalised status. However, there is indeed a distinct lack of bitterness in Bonutto's narrative regarding his own experiences of internment. Instead, he constructs his experiences of internment as a test of his loyalty to Australia, which he ultimately passes with flying colours.

Bonutto was living on the Darling Downs in South-East Queensland when he was interned twice: once early on the morning that Italy entered the war (10 June 1940), and again six months after his initial release. He was finally released in 1943, and it was later revealed that he was the victim of a conspiracy by 'embittered Australian veterans from the First World War' to target him and other prominent and successful Italian migrants.<sup>30</sup> When a local police officer and several federal detectives came to his farm on the morning of his first arrest, Bonutto joked, 'I have just heard the bad news over the wireless, and I hope you don't hold me responsible for it.'<sup>31</sup> This first arrest was based upon accusations of his having spoken and written in defence of Italy, of sending money to Italy during the fascist regime, and suspicion of conspiring with his bank manager, who was also under investigation because of his German background.<sup>32</sup> While the last accusation also contributed to his second arrest, Bonutto dismissed the second accusation on proof that the money he had sent to Italy had been solely for the benefit of his ageing mother. To the first count, he replied:

I plead guilty to [behaving as a proud Italian], sir ... I am just as proud of my ancestry as you are of yours. Can you give me a plausible reason why I should not be? However, if by this charge you infer that a good, proud Italian cannot possibly make a good, proud Australian, I maintain that only a good Italian can make a good Australian providing he is rightly treated and given the same rights and privileges as other Australians. A man who hasn't got the guts to admit openly that he loves his mother-country will never be able to love his country of adoption. Compared with Australia, Italy has given me nothing, yet I love her all



the same, in the same way as a poor son loves his poor mother. It is not the good, proud Italian you have to fear . . . but the bad one. A bad Italian will never make a good Australian, but a good Italian will.<sup>33</sup>

As discussed above, Bonutto's understandings of citizenship and ethnicity allow him to construct Italian and Australian identities that are not mutually exclusive. In this passage, he defines himself as both Italian and Australian; his capacity for love of his nation as an Italian helps him to be a good Australian, but ethnic identification does not impact upon his sense of civic duty and loyalty.

Bonutto's internment represents a crisis point for his identity as a New Australian and naturalised British subject, but it does not significantly affect his sense of Italian ethnic identity. He writes, 'It nearly shattered my faith in and love of Australia.'<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, however, Bonutto emerges from this crisis with an even stronger nationalist conviction, largely due to the various prominent individuals who came to his defence during his internment. By equating his internment with Jesus's crisis of faith at Calvary, Bonutto depicts himself as a migrant martyr surviving a crisis of his faith in his adopted country. His experiences of internment provide the crisis point in this narrative about the formation of his New Australian identity and citizenship. His fervent belief in assimilation is used to testify to his own successful assimilation, and therefore qualify his claim to Australianess. His complex understandings of citizenship and ethnicity, however, allow him to claim both Italian and Australian identities.

### **Dalseno's limbo: Internment as a liminal space for the multicultural Australian**

Writing from the perspective of the early 1990s, when multicultural policy and ideology had become an increasingly entrenched — albeit still contested — part of Australian society and identity, Dalseno uses multiculturalism as a retrospective lens for viewing his own experiences, and the experiences of his Italian community in North Queensland during the 1920s and 1930s. *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* revises many of the themes encountered in Bonutto's *A Migrant's Story*, namely assimilation, citizenship and ethnic identity, but Dalseno is more critical of assimilationism than Bonutto, largely due to his multiculturalist perspective. He presents multiculturalism as the cultural ideal towards which Australia was inevitably pointed, and evaluates it in a positive light. Most importantly, Dalseno embraces multiculturalism as a form of national identity, of which the character of Peter, transformed by the experience of internment, represents the prototypical multicultural Australian citizen. The protagonist, Peter Delano, is presented as a sort of multicultural hero, on a quest to overcome the assimilationist attitudes he has adopted at school, to formulate an identity as an Italian Australian and, through acknowledging his own ethnicity, to contribute to Australia's growing cultural diversity. While the experience of internment presented its challenges to Peter, it is not the same crisis of faith in the Australian state and nation as it was for Bonutto. Rather, in Dalseno's narrative internment is a liminal space, in which Peter waits out his time until he can claim naturalised status as a British subject, yet the experience also offers him the opportunity to revitalise his sense of Italian ethnicity.

It is easiest, yet also rather problematic, to conflate the character of Peter Delano with Peter Dalseno the author; throughout this article, 'Peter' is used to designate

the character in the narrative, while ‘Dalseno’ refers to the author. The information provided on the book’s back cover is both a brief author’s biography and narrative summary, encouraging the reader to read the narrative as autobiography by revealing the similarities between Dalseno’s life and Peter’s narrative.

Dalseno was born in Italy in 1921 to a single mother. They migrated to Australia when the boy was two years of age. He was educated at a Catholic boarding school, and gained tertiary qualifications as an accountant. Like Dalseno, Peter is born to an unwed patrician mother, migrates at age two, grows up on the cane fields of North Queensland, is educated in Catholic boarding schools and eventually becomes an accountant. The changes to names and events are largely superficial. Indeed, John Gatt-Rutter argues that Dalseno’s fictionalising is a ‘transparent disguise and distancing device’,<sup>35</sup> highlighting several prominent figures, such as Claudio Alcorso, who are recognisable in Dalseno’s narrative despite his attempts at ambiguity. Gaetano Rando also presents no doubt about the narrative’s status as a family biography and an autobiography.<sup>36</sup>

The use of fictionality in autobiography and biography allows writers to disguise real events and real people for the purpose of protecting those involved without having to sacrifice the significance of the events or the characters.<sup>37</sup> *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* often portrays the Italian community of the Herbert River region of North Queensland in what Dalseno admits to being a less than flattering light. Although Dalseno’s narrative risks devolving into stereotype at times, both historical distance and fictional techniques allow him to speak ‘truthfully’ about his own and others’ experiences, and to create ‘characters’ that represent both broad and specific experiences important to the Italian migrant communities of northern Queensland. Indeed, Gatt-Rutter characterises the novel as ‘at once autobiography and social chronicle, firmly inserted in the history of Queensland Italians and of the Second World War’.<sup>38</sup> Compared with Dalseno, Bonutto is far more circumspect in his depiction of the real communities he inhabited, initially writing at a time when he was still an active member of the Italian and broader Queensland communities depicted. As an autobiographical narrative unprotected by the techniques of fiction utilised by Dalseno, Bonutto’s memoir necessarily engages in acts of elision in order to maintain the privacy and anonymity of the real people involved in his life, and is arguably more successful at this.

Dalseno’s narrative shares with *A Migrant’s Story* a thematic preoccupation with citizenship, identity and assimilation. Yet Dalseno’s exploration of assimilation differs significantly from Bonutto’s. Not only is assimilation viewed through the retrospective lens of multiculturalism; it is seen from the perspective of the pre-war second generation. As a six-year-old, Pierino Delano reluctantly begins school at the Halifax Convent boarding school, and is beaten and shaken into adopting the Anglicised form of his name, Peter. He soon adjusts to life at school, but one evening in bed, ‘consumed by melancholy’, young Peter dwells upon the shifts his cultural identity is undergoing, signified by the Anglicisation of his name and his own shift from thinking in Italian: “‘You are Peter!’ he thought. “I am no longer Pierino.”’<sup>39</sup> Dalseno illustrates the difficult processes of identity formation experienced by the second generation who, until they reached schooling age, grew up geographically in Australia but culturally and linguistically Italian.<sup>40</sup> Bonutto, on the other hand, believes that young (or indeed infant) migrants ‘more easily surmount the problems of assimilation’.<sup>41</sup> Citing the example of his two young

nephews who migrated at the ages of eight and ten and were educated, like Dalseno and Peter, in boarding schools, Bonutto states, 'In every other way [but their hazy childhood memories of Italy] they are purely and simply Australians.'<sup>42</sup> Dalseno describes Peter's identity in more complex and fractured terms: 'He was Italian by birth, Australian by domicility, and Irish in spirit.'<sup>43</sup> Peter's Irish Catholic education and his geographical reality eventually school him into an assimilated Australian identification – Italianness is a fading memory and a coincidence of birth that Peter actively suppresses in order to gain belonging in the schoolyard.

Although Peter comes to think of himself as wholly Australian as a result of his education, the outbreak of war and his subsequent internment disrupt this process of identification and place him in a liminal space, both physically and metaphorically, wherein his cultural and civic identities do not yet coincide. It is Peter's act of allegiance with Australia – his decision to enlist with the Australian army – that reveals his citizenship as 'unresolved'.<sup>44</sup> Peter's right to British subjecthood through his mother's marriage to a naturalised Italian migrant when Peter was approximately four years old 'expired' at age sixteen, but he was ineligible to apply for naturalisation until reaching the age of majority at twenty-one. Peter laments this unresolved status as a civic limbo: 'I'm now nineteen years old – still a minor! Accordingly, I am too old to enjoy the benefit of my mother's citizenship; too young, to be eligible to apply for the rights. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one years, I live in a state of limbo.'<sup>45</sup> This state of limbo is given a physical space in the form of the internment camp where Peter waits out not just the war but also the time until he can apply for naturalisation.

Peter's experiences in the internment camp are central to the development of his ethnic identity because he is temporarily excluded from official definitions of who can be Australian and is forced, through his classification as an Italian enemy alien, to rethink his ethnic identification. It is thus a limbo not just for his Australianness but also his Italianness. Interactions with other internees assist him to process and develop both his Italian and Australian identities. For example, early in his internment, Peter befriends Federico, a communist chef who is subtly instrumental in awakening Peter's acceptance of his Italianness. When Peter asks Federico whether it is disloyal to side with the sentiments of their detainers, his friend replies:

I don't know what the hell you're getting at ... You have learnt nothing! To think like that, young man, you are not an Italian. Loyalty is for the family! Remember that! You are loyal to no one but to your family. When you are sick, who is by your bedside? Huh! And when you die, who is by your graveside?<sup>46</sup>

Peter's doubts about where his loyalty lies attest to the thoroughness of his assimilation, but Federico pares loyalty down to a basic human rather than civic relationship. Recognising the Italianness of his family, both biological and by marriage, his friends, and his community, Peter is able to recognise it within himself.

While Federico is a provocative — almost Falstaffian — figure, Joe Cantamessa provides a more serious Italian Australian role model both inside and outside the internment camp. It is the internment of Cantamessa, rather than his own, that leads to Peter's disillusionment with the Anglo-Australian system into which he has been educated. Like Bonutto, Cantamessa is a naturalised citizen who successfully negotiates both Italian and Australian communities: 'he and his wife devoted their allegiance to the "New Land", and directed their energy towards a program of

absorbing the contemporary and indigenous custom while retaining their love of tradition and faith in the land of their birth'.<sup>47</sup> Cantamessa is also heavily involved in the social, political and economic affairs of his region, for which he is publicly recognised in a visit from the prime minister. When Peter encounters Cantamessa in the internment camp, he is described as conveying 'an air of a truly disillusioned, traumatic [sic] and offended citizen'.<sup>48</sup> As not just a naturalised subject but also a model citizen, Cantamessa's internment problematises the concept of citizenship to which Peter aspires. Like Bonutto, Dalseno is critical of the lack of differentiation between naturalised and unnaturalised migrants in the internment process, which he describes as 'traumatic' and a 'stigma'.<sup>49</sup> In the case of Cantamessa, Dalseno suggests that his internment rendered his naturalisation, and by extension Australia's naturalisation and citizenship processes and institutions, 'valueless in a moral and civil sense'.<sup>50</sup>

Upon reaching legal maturity, Peter obtains naturalisation. This occurs after his eventual release from the camp to work in the Civil Alien Corps, where he is soon promoted to a clerical position in the Civil Construction Corps and recommended by the local police for citizenship.<sup>51</sup> His newfound sympathy and allegiance with Italian Australians is signified by his regret at being alienated from those with whom he had worked in the Civil Alien Corps: '[The recommendation for citizenship] represented a lift of emotions for Peter. Of age, he had access to citizenship. It did produce an undesirable side-effect in that in receiving the benefits of "one of them" – as one Italian put it – he alienated himself from his former co-workers'.<sup>52</sup> In his new workplace, however, Peter 'came to understand the meaning of tolerance. He was addressed as "Mate"'.<sup>53</sup> Prominent in liberal multicultural theory, the notion of tolerance is criticised for maintaining a hierarchical relationship between dominant cultures — primarily Anglo Celtic — and migrant and ethnic groups: 'toleration . . . only makes sense if one believes there is one single way of life that is superior to all others'.<sup>54</sup> Peter never articulates an Italian or Italian Australian identity; instead, he learns to *tolerate* his Italianness as a difference within his own Australianness. While tolerance remains a problematic concept in multicultural theory, in Peter's case it is a useful way to contain and maintain ethnic identity and difference within a multiculturalist framework.

A multicultural Australian citizenship bridges the relationship between ethnicity, citizenship and humanity, and is given the space to formulate within the limbo of internment. While Australian citizenship is still desirable to Peter, and signifies an official recognition within mainstream Australian society, he has a revitalised understanding of his ethnic heritage and understands loyalty as a human relationship that transcends citizenship. For Dalseno, the act of autobiography itself becomes an act of resistance against culturally restricted notions of civic belonging that led in part to the internment policies; the autobiographical novel about the development of Peter's civic and personal identity is, in his own view, his contribution to multiculturalism.

## Conclusion

Both narratives use their characters' internment as a central experience that is pivotal to the formation of civic identities, belonging within Australian society and negotiation of Italian and Australian cultures. Bonutto's maintenance of his

Italian ethnic identity in the face of his own fervent belief in assimilation is made possible through his understanding of ethnicity as a virtually unshakeable identity inherited at birth and citizenship as a public demonstration of loyalty to his adopted country. His faith in assimilation as a migrant's civic duty remains unshaken, even after his experience of conspiracy, racism and xenophobia that leads to his internment. Internment is used to support Bonutto's claim to an Australian identity, yet his construction of nationalism as an innate capacity forces him to publicly articulate the centrality of his Italianness to his ability to be Australian. After a state of limbo, Peter's narrative culminates in his official recognition as an Australian, symbolised by his immediate naturalisation upon reaching the age of majority and apparent in his linguistic and cultural assimilation at a young age. However, it is by interpreting Peter's narrative retrospectively through multiculturalism, and by placing his story within the broader context of Italian settlement in North Queensland, that Dalseno maintains a semblance of Peter's ethnic identity — that is, multiculturalism gives importance to an ethnic heritage that Peter had otherwise rejected, and that Dalseno re-evaluates through the autobiographical act.

The experience of internment galvanises Bonutto's Australianness, while for Dalseno it is the site where Peter is able to recover his lost Italianness and to hybridise this with his Australianness to construct a prototypical multicultural Australian identity. Both narratives present internment as a state of ambiguity that allows, if not requires, a reflection upon the shifting criteria for migrant belonging throughout the course of the twentieth century, with specific ramifications for Queensland's historical attitudes to migrants and political difference.

## Endnotes

- 1 Gaetano Rando, 'Italo-Australians during the Second World War: Some perceptions of internment', *Studi d'Italianistica nell'Africa Australe/Italian Studies in Southern Africa* 18:1 (2005), 26.
- 2 See Claudio Alcorso, *The wind you say* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993); Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, *The internment diaries of Mario Sardi* (Alphington, Vic.: Lucerne Press, 2013).
- 3 Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, 'Ubi bene, ibi patria: The Second World War and citizenship in a country town', in J. Beaumont et al. (eds), *Under suspicion: Citizenship and internment in Australia during the Second World War* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2008), p. 32. For the original report, see Alien Immigration Commission, *Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into and Report on the Social and Economic Effect of Increase in Number of Aliens in North Queensland* (Brisbane: Queensland Government, 1925).
- 4 For more on Australian citizenship and its history, see Alastair Davidson, *From subject to citizen: Australian citizenship in the twentieth century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts, *Australian citizenship* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004); Ann-Mari Jordens, *Redefining Australians: Immigration, citizenship, and national identity* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995).
- 5 O'Brien, 'Citizenship, rights and emergency powers in Second World War Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 53:2 (2007), 209–10; Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, 'Ubi bene, ibi patria', p. 23.

- 6 David Brown, 'Citizenship and naturalisation in a historical context: The story of Carmelo Belfiore', in Beaumont et al. (eds), *Under Suspicion*, p. 38.
- 7 O'Brien, 'Ubi bene, ibi patria', p. 17.
- 8 Nino Randazzo and Michael Cigler, *The Italians in Australia* (Melbourne: AE Press, 1987), p. 116.
- 9 Randazzo and Cigler, *The Italians in Australia*, p. 117. For an in-depth study of fascism and Italians in Australia, see Gianfranco Cresciani, *Fascism, anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia, 1922–1945* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1980).
- 10 Randazzo and Cigler, *The Italians in Australia*, p. 139. For further detail on the impact of internment in Queensland, see Don Dignan, 'The Internment of Italians in Queensland', in Richard Bosworth and Romano Ugolini (eds), *War, internment and mass migration: The Italo-Australian Experience 1940–1990* (Rome: Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, 2003), pp. 61–73.
- 11 Randazzo and Cigler, *The Italians in Australia*, pp. 139–40. See also Robert Pascoe, *Buongiorno Australia: Our Italian heritage* (Richmond, Vic.: Greenhouse Publications, 1987), pp. 143–6.
- 12 See Romano Ugolini, 'From POW to emigrant: The post-war migrant experience', in Bosworth and Ugolini (eds), *War, internment and mass migration*, pp. 125–38.
- 13 Gianfranco Cresciani, 'The bogey of the Italian Fifth Column', in Bosworth and Ugolini (eds), *War, internment and mass migration*, p. 30.
- 14 Dignan, 'The internment of Italians in Queensland', p. 61.
- 15 Claudio Alcorso and Caroline Alcorso, 'Italians in Australia during World War II', in Stephen Castles (ed.), *Australia's Italians: Culture and community in a changing society* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), p. 19.
- 16 Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, 'The internment of Australian born and naturalised British subjects of Italian origin', in Bosworth and Ugolini (eds), *War, internment and mass migration*, p. 92.
- 17 Libby Connors, Lynette Finch, Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor, *Australia's frontline: Remembering the 1939–45 War* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1992), p. 90.
- 18 Pascoe, *Buongiorno Australia*, p. 149. Randazzo and Cigler, however, report that according to the 1974 census, 51.6 per cent of the Italian-born population resided in rural areas. See Randazzo and Cigler, *The Italians in Australia*, p. 149.
- 19 Ghassan Hage, *Against paranoid nationalism: Searching for hope in a shrinking society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 60. For more on the evolution of Australian multicultural policy and its relationship with immigration, see, for example, Ghassan Hage, *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998); James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The story of Australian immigration* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Lack and Jacqueline Templeton, *Bold experiment: A documentary history of Australian immigration since 1945* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995); Mark Lopez, *The Origins of multiculturalism in Australian politics 1945–1975* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000).
- 20 Stephen Castles, 'Italian migration and settlement since 1945', in Castles (ed.), *Australia's Italians*, p. 52.
- 21 All biographical information has been taken from Osvaldo Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (Brisbane: H. Pole, 1963) and Osvaldo Bonutto, *A migrant's story: The struggle and success of an Italian-Australian, 1920s–1960s* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1994).

- 22 Osvaldo Bonutto and Elisa Bonutto, 'Acknowledgments', in Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1994), p. xi.
- 23 Don Dignan, 'Foreword', in Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1994), pp. vii–viii.
- 24 See Pascoe, *Buongiorno Australia*, pp. 201–7; Randazzo and Cigler, *The Italians in Australia*, pp. 170–1.
- 25 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), p. 139. Quotation marks in original.
- 26 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963).
- 27 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), p. 138.
- 28 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), p. 138.
- 29 Gaetano Rando, 'From great works to Alcheringa: A socio-historical survey of Italian writers in Australia', in Gaetano Rando (ed.), *Italian writers in Australia: Essays and texts* (Wollongong: Department of European Languages, University of Wollongong, 1983), p. 55.
- 30 Dignan, 'Foreword', in *A migrant's story* (1994), p. ix. See also Neil J. Byrne, 'The wartime treatment of Italians in South Queensland', in Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1994), p. 97.
- 31 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), p. 92.
- 32 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), pp. 96–8.
- 33 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), pp. 96–7.
- 34 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1963), p. 113.
- 35 John Gatt-Rutter, "'You're on the list!'" Writing the Australian Italian experience of war-time internment', *Flinders University Languages Group Online Review* 3:2 (2008), 46.
- 36 Gaetano Rando, 'Italo-Australian and after: Recent expressions of Italian Australian ethnicity and the migration experience', *Altreitalie*, 20 (2000), p. 71.
- 37 Rosa R. Cappiello's acerbic autobiographical novel exemplifies this form among Italian Australian writers, although the fictionalisation appears to be an artistic choice rather than an act of protection. See Rosa R. Cappiello, *Oh lucky country* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1984); Jessica Carniel, "'Either feed your belly or nourish your soul": Work, artistic aspiration and autobiography in Rosa R. Cappiello's *Oh lucky country*', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 18:1 (2016), 130–49.
- 38 Gatt-Rutter, "'You're on the list!'", p. 52.
- 39 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties* (Brisbane: Boolarong Books, 1994), pp. 69–70.
- 40 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, pp. 156–7.
- 41 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1994), p. 10.
- 42 Bonutto, *A migrant's story* (1994),
- 43 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 136.
- 44 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 190.
- 45 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 186.
- 46 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 214.
- 47 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 104.
- 48 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 265.
- 49 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 200.
- 50 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 200.
- 51 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 276.
- 52 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 276.



53 Dalseno, *Sugar, tears and Eyeties*, p. 276.

54 C. L. Ten, 'Liberalism and multiculturalism', in Gordan L. Clark, Dean Forbes and Roderrick Francis (eds), *Multiculturalism, difference and postmodernism* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1993), p. 56. See also Hage, *White Nation* and, for a rejoinder to Hage's criticisms of tolerance, Bob Hodge and John O'Carroll, *Borderwork in multicultural Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006).